

# ***FISH & WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET***

**Meeting Date:** October 8, 2015

**Agenda Item:** Waterfowl Regulations – Central Flyway Duck Zones Adjustments (to match goose zones)

**Division:** Wildlife

**Action Needed:** Proposed

**Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 10 minutes

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## **Background**

Through federal regulations, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service allow Montana to divide its Central Flyway portion into two different zones for waterfowl hunting. Zones are areas within the state's portion of the flyway that can have different hunting season dates to accommodate the timing of migrations and/or hunters' desires. The zones can be different for ducks and geese. By USFWS rules, the zones for geese can be changed every year but those for ducks can only be changed every five years. The opportunity for a change will be the 2016 regulations. The next opportunity to propose a change would be in 2020 for the 2021 season. Montana's zones for geese were first established in 2014 with a seven-county south zone to include Carbon and Yellowstone counties, in addition to the five counties that are included in the current duck zone. The zones allow for more late-season hunter opportunity. The duck zones, however, could not likewise be changed at that time.

FWP is proposing to change the existing duck zones to match the goose zones. This would add Yellowstone and Carbon counties to the existing duck Zone 2 of the Central Flyway portion of Montana, which is currently made up of Big Horn, Custer, Prairie, Rosebud and Treasure counties. This change would make the duck zones the same as the goose zones and thus be less confusing to hunters. It would also offer some additional late-season opportunity to duck hunters. However, because of the way the split season closure dates fall, the change will reduce some opportunity for duck hunters during October, particularly in northwestern Yellowstone County where a number of ponds offer good October hunting but freeze up early and so do not offer any late-season hunting. FWP would still have the option of either using or not using the duck and goose zones in future years, but these zone boundaries for ducks would remain in place through the 2020 season. While Montana had federally-approved duck zones in place from 1982 to the present, they were not used from 1997 through 2013 because the 97-day season then in place was considered adequate to provide hunting opportunity.

## **Public Involvement Process & Results**

A number of hunters have suggested this change to FWP. If adopted, this proposal will go out for public comment through Nov.6.

## **Alternatives and Analysis**

We did consider excluding a portion of northwestern Yellowstone County from the duck Zone 2 to mitigate the potential loss of some October duck hunting opportunity as described above. But by describing a portion of a county it would complicate the resulting legal description to be less easily-understood and would also not precisely match the existing goose zones. To date we have always used easily-understood county descriptions for waterfowl zones.

## **Agency Recommendation & Rationale**

FWP recommends that the Commission adopt for public comment changing the duck zones to match the existing goose zones in the Central Flyway portion of the state.

## **Proposed Motion**

I move that the Commission adopt for public comment changing the duck zones to match the existing goose zones in the Central Flyway portion of the state.